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PRESERVATION OF THE ADIRONDACKS

By Bernard Lammers[*]

A late-summer conference on the future of the Adirondack Mountains brought out all the problems which will confront those who want to save a few natural areas for the education, contemplation and enjoyment of coming generations. The conference was held at St. Lawrence University—a 115 year old liberal arts college in the extreme northern tip of New York State. The institution has always viewed itself as having a special mission to serve the "North Country," which in past decades was so remote from Boston, New York, and Albany, that the college's history was published under the title "A Candle in the Wilderness." The university lies in the county seat of St. Lawrence County in a region of rivers flowing from the northern foothills of the Adirondacks to the St. Lawrence River.

The conference drew plenty of foresters, ecologists, wildlife biologists, and officers of environmental protection societies, as well as legislators, resort owners and newspaper editors of the Adirondack area. The official panelists included a roster of specialists from the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks—a state agency which made recommendations for the protection of this spectacular area of unspoiled mountains, lakes and forests.

The hand of history was palpably present as participants made constant reference to the "Forever Wild Clause" of the New York State Constitution of 1895. One entire meeting was devoted to legal interpretation of this famous law which repeatedly saved the Adirondacks. It forbids commercial development of lands which are part of the New York State forest preserve. As a happy result, the Adirondacks and Catskills constitute a protected state forest area almost half as large as all other state forests in the United States combined.

Participants were uneasily aware of the fact that thirty-five million people live within easy reach of the Adirondacks by automobile and they could quickly destroy the area while enjoying it. Citizens of New York State recently fought down an attempt to turn the Adirondacks into a national park. The state constitution gives better protection to the forests and streams than they would receive under policies which apply to national parks. The recent example of Yosemite becoming a "tourist slum"—now being corrected in some respects—had a lot to do with New York's decision to protect its own heritage. Those who value the experience of a wilderness area do not want to hear hundreds of internal combustion engines, walk through ankle-deep polaroid rippings at scenic spots, feast their eyes on a vast sea of aluminum camping trucks, and listen to a dozen transistor radios instead of forest sounds.

But the conferees had to face the economic problems which will plague citizens from now on when they wrestle with environmental protection. The so-called "anti-ecology movement" is essentially a group of people who feel that conservationists are mindlessly unaware of the importance of jobs and resources for the national welfare. The conference also revealed regional conflict as evidenced by a participant who spoke of "the arrogant New York City types who tell us what to do in the Adirondacks but don't care about people who live here year-round and need jobs." But politics is a process of conflict resolution. Both sides may be able to recognize each others' legitimate claims. And even those who are most determined to preserve a few wilderness areas as sacred shrines are now beginning to admit the painful fact that access and use may have to be rationed if users are not to destroy what they love.

Even class conflict was in evidence. An officer of one so-called conservation group stood up to say that the future of the Adirondacks should be given over to development of "second homes"—privately-owned vacation properties. He insisted this was necessary to provide needed tax base for county and town governments. A wildlife biologist in the audience immediately reacted—in conversation with a small group—by saying that the second home approach was a rich man's affair. He preferred a very different policy which would keep large areas accessible to the "common man" and cultivate large deer herds so the common man may enjoy hunting. A young man from the University of

Pennsylvania rose to say he would not want the Adirondacks to become a development comparable to the Poconos. Some see the Poconos as just another suburb.

An interesting—and possibly unexpected—conflict occurred among specialists in wildlife management. Some thought it might be possible to re-establish species which once lived naturally in the Adirondacks, such as moose, cougars, and wolves. Others thought the moose would no longer have the range necessary for survival and reproduction, and that overlapping ranges of white-tailed deer would expose the moose to disease. A Canadian wildlife specialist, revered for his writing style and political "neutrality," thought that re-stocking of moose was worth a try. Another wildlife man thought it would be simply cruel to release a "noble animal like the moose" in an area where his kind had failed to survive once before.

A thorn in the side of the entire conference was the question of deer herds. Those who value wilderness tend to believe that a thin herd which survives naturally is the ideal condition. Those who want to hunt or create a hunters' economy tend to believe in managed herds which are fed, moved about by snowmobile herding in winter, and caused to reproduce in numbers beyond the size of a herd which could be sustained by the vegetation of an area. One man in the audience who heard this argument turned to a neighbor and whispered: "When you feed 'em, move 'em, and shoot 'em, they're cattle, not wildlife."

Ancient arguments between conflicting schools of forest management appeared. A commercial forester declared that a forest left to itself—without human interference—would soon become all beech and hemlock. "More desirable species" would not survive, and the forest would have inferior moisture-retention capacities as a watershed. A listener wondered how Mother Nature ever survived during those thousands of years without logging and monoculture. The conference was not long enough and not specialized enough to get to the bottom of the differences of opinion about forest management. But the various opinions are on the record, crying out for careful comparative studies with lots of statistics and hard data. A number of confusing statements were made about the complex relationship of commercial forestry and wood-using industries. One forester said a furniture manufacturer had refused to come to the area because of lack of transportation facilities. Yet he admitted that heavy

trucks are daily removing mammoth trees which dwarf units of finished furniture in both wieght and size. Several questions remained unanswered about the effect of highways and factories on species of wildlife which need relatively large areas for feeding, watering, and breeding.

Another "class conflict" arose over the use of the forest as a place to operate the various types of gasoline-driven vehicles which have been devised by the mind of man. A university woman in northern New York who was recently a crusader—along with her husband—in the search for legislation to control snowmobiles on private land and village streets, now says diffidently that the snowmobile has become a "class issue." Apparently those asking for controls are viewed as having no sympathy with those who make money by selling snowmobiles and those for whom this machine is viewed as an important source of recreation and "family togetherness" which is well within their means—given today's easy credit.

This is a hard ideology to answer. Those who have lost their valuable shrubbery, the peace and quiet of their Sunday afternoons, and their tranquil walks in the winter forest to the ravages of the snow machine—and who have witnessed the cruel killing of deer by people on snowmobiles (who sometimes lose a finger or a hand in the process themselves)—are no match for the advertising power of the manufacturers and sellers. The newest development is the all-terrain vehicle which respects nothing, goes through water and up the sides of steep mountains like an engine of war, and which is now being touted as the year-round, low-priced source of happiness for those who love to burn gasoline, go fast, make loud noises, and "conquer" nature.

A poignant note was sounded—ironically—by a resort owner who noted that magnificent Lake George was being ruined by motorboats. He cited statistics to show that more than one third of the total petroleum being used by motorboats ends up in the water, and that the lake water has the smell and taste of petroleum for a whole month after the tourist season is over. He said he reluctantly began to forbid the use of hydroplanes at his resort which is on a smaller lake—even when they were built by "father-son teams"—simply because such craft are so totally inappropriate for a small, quiet lake where other people are trying to spend a few days of vacation. He said there is now a 110

horsepower boat on a neighboring property which rockets from one end of the lake to the other in ninety seconds.

A conference participant, who had recently written an article on the incompatibility of scenic rivers and internal combustion engines, cited the case of Greenwood Lake—within commuting distance of New York City—which became an aquatic dragstrip during the years of prosperity after World War II. He begged the resort owners to form associations which would help people realize that happiness may not come from outdoing each other with bigger, dirtier, noisier engines. He said, "Don't wait for government agencies to control this situation through zoning." He got a ripple of understanding sighs from the audience when he pointed out that a government agency cannot move without a steady show of support from citizens who appreciate its purposes.

The most sobering moments of the conference came during discussions among those who earnestly believe in the preservation of a few true wilderness areas. Even when they abstracted their analysis from the economic problem of jobs and resources, the "class conflict" of who will use the forest for what, and the divergent schools of wildlife management—they still found themselves up against the bleak mathematical problem of too many people per acre of forest. One man, whose sincerity and credentials as a "wild forest advocate" could not be doubted, reluctantly conceded that hikers were literally wearing away the delicate alpine vegetation of the "high peak areas" of the Adirondacks. His thoughtful conclusion was that a few intelligently planned and well managed trails could get the hordes of vacationers to the top with far less damage. He agreed with other speakers who pleaded for a new and different ideology of forest use to de-emphasize the obsession with "getting to the top" of a high peak and motivate people to seek out and enjoy other delightful—if less spectacular—parts of the Adirondack forest.

Inevitably, the hard headed men from state government pointed out that goals being aired at the conference could not be met because of inadequate funds and personnel. An important state official doubted that the people of New York State would approve a $120 million bond issue for forest protection "in the present fiscal climate." A professor of political science noted

that the federal government was spending far more than that every day on war-related activities, but the realistic state official refused to discuss the question of re-ordering national priorities. He was trapped in one unit of a federal system and had apparently learned the limited but certain rationality of doing one's job 9-to-5 and wasting no effort on peripheral possibilities.

On the final day of the conference, politics was transcended. In a more poetic mood, there were quotations from nineteenth century hikers who had enjoyed the breathtaking experience of the unspoiled Adirondacks, and words of praise for the camper who takes care to leave the forest unsullied. These brief meditations on ethics came as a welcome relief and summation for participants who had labored through the hard economics and dry details of tax specialists and land-use planners. The audience broke into spontaneous applause for the first and only time when a New York City lawyer rose to say that the conference had been a landmark.

This conference was a model for analyzing not only the future of the Adirondacks but the future of people and their surroundings everywhere. There were legislators who had recently voted on both sides of the issue when New York State created an Adirondack Park Agency. There were state officials and employees charged with implementing aspects of existing law. University professors, writers, and editors from all parts of the Adirondacks posed searching questions and received answers from freshly informed members of the state study commission. Interested citizens had an opportunity to probe the thinking of their state representatives, and no one was hurried or constrained in formulating ideas or asking for explanations. One of the foremost utilities of the conference was the repeated reminder that the resources of an area mean many different things to individuals and groups interested in their management or protection.

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